



What Patients Need  
to Know About  
**Herbal  
Therapy**

**VA**  **PAHCS**  
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## *Why do I need to read a pamphlet about herbal therapy?*

Herbal therapies are becoming a popular addition to “traditional” medicine. Sources of information on these therapies can vary from news reports and magazine articles to advertising that may contain false claims. This pamphlet was designed to provide the veterans and their families with accurate information, without bias.

Herbs are not miracle cures. Do not stop taking your prescription medicine without speaking to your health care provider. Doing so may be dangerous to your health.

## *What is herbal therapy?*

Herbs have been used in medicine for as long as people have been on earth. The use of herbal therapies has been

recorded in ancient Greece, Egypt, Rome, India, Russia, and China. Many modern medicines came from Native American remedies.

There are many examples of drugs used today that are from plants. They may come from the plant’s leaves, roots, flowers or fruits. Digoxin is a good example of a drug that comes from a plant source. Digoxin is used to treat problems with heart rhythms or heart failure. Psyllium, the ingredient in Metamucil© used to add fiber to a patient’s diet, is also a natural product.

Herbal therapy has been gaining popularity in the United States as a compliment to “conventional medicine.” In many other countries herbs are already regulated by the government and available by prescription.

### *Things to know before you a take herbal medicine*

Herbal therapies are considered a food supplement. The FDA does not control herbal therapies, so there is no guarantee that these products are safe or effective. Unlike other drugs, no testing needs to be done before a company can claim that an herbal product works.

### *How should I choose an herbal product?*

Discuss your choice with your health care provider. Then look for brand that standardizes their product. This means that the same amount of herb is in each dose. Avoid products that do not list the ingredients and their strengths on the label. The label should list the scientific name of the product, a lot or batch number, the date the product was manufactured, and the expiration date.

### *Where can I get more information about herbal therapies?*

There are many sources of information on herbs, but be sure it is from a neutral source, not advertising by an herbal manufacturer. Your first source of medical in-

formation should always be your health care provider. Physicians, nurses, physician's assistants, and pharmacists are all good people to ask. Your local library may carry books on herbal therapies. The VA Palo Alto Health Care System library also has books on this subject.

Many herbal therapies do have an effect on your body. Before starting any new treatment, you should know what the risks and benefits are. Any medicine, herbal or other, should be discussed with your health care provider before using.

### *Are all herbal remedies good for you?*

Not all herbal therapies are safe for all people. It is possible to have an allergic or toxic reaction to an herb. Herbs may interfere with the effects of your prescribed medicines. The last page of this pamphlet lists some herbal remedies that have been shown to be dangerous.



## *Aloe Vera*

Aloe Vera has been used in medicine for thousands of years. It was brought to America in the 1500's by the Spaniards.

**Uses:** Aloe gel is used on burns, scrapes, cuts, and sunburn.

Aloe juice has been used internally for constipation.

**How it works:** On the skin, aloe turns off the chemicals that cause swelling and pain. It may also fight bacteria and fungus. Fresh aloe gel straight from a plant seems to work better than the aloe gel for sale in stores. The aloe juice that you can drink is a very powerful laxative. It stops the intestine from re-absorbing water.

**Dose:** Aloe gel may be applied to your skin in whatever amount is comfortable for you. The amount of aloe juice to drink is not really known. But it is not recommended that you drink more than 1 quart per day.

**Safety:** Because aloe is such a powerful laxative you may have diarrhea and cramping.

Aloe juice should never be given to children or elderly patients. Aloe may affect your absorption of other medications, and should not be taken within 2 hours of taking any other medicine. Diabetics should monitor blood sugars closely after drinking aloe juice.



## *Bilberry*

Bilberry is a relative of blueberries. Blueberries are said to have the same effects as Bilberry.

**Uses:** To treat night blindness, diabetic retinopathy, varicose veins, and hemorrhoids.

**How it works:** Stabilizes collagen and blood vessels.

**Dose:** Look for Bilberry extract standardized to 25% anthocyanidin content. Dose is 80-160 mg three times daily.

**Safety:** No known side effects to Bilberry. But Bilberry may affect blood clotting .

Patients on Warfarin, Ticlopidine, and Clopidogrel should use with caution and inform their health care provider.



## Cayenne

Cayenne pepper or capsaicin is from a family of peppers.

**Uses:** Stimulates circulation, gastric stimulant. Decreases nerve related pain such as diabetic neuropathy and shingles.

**How it works:** Cayenne depletes a substance in the body that mediates pain.

**Dose:**

*On the skin:* 0.025% to 0.075% applied four times daily.

*Capsules:* 100-600 mg three times daily

*Tincture (1:10):* 10-40 drops three times daily

**Safety:** Side effects of eating cayenne pepper may include stomach upset, diarrhea, and burning during bowel movements. Increasing the dose of cayenne gradually may help.

When using the capsaicin cream on the skin, the product must be used four times a day and must be used on a continuous basis to be effective. Avoid touching the eyes or any cuts after handling the cream. Vinegar can be used to remove cayenne from the hands.

Cayenne may increase bleeding times and should be used with caution by patients taking Warfarin.





## Chamomile

Chamomile has been a popular herb for a long time. You may remember its use in the story “The Tale of Peter Rabbit”.

**Uses:** Chamomile is used for skin irritations, hemorrhoids, and mouth irritations. Teas and tinctures can be used for GI spasms, menstrual cramps, GI upset and as a gentle sleep aid.

**How it works:** The ingredients of chamomile can reduce swelling. One ingredient has been shown to be chemically related to drugs like Valium and Ativan.

**Dose:**

*Tea:* 1 tablespoonful of flowers steeped in 1 cup boiling water for 30-60 minutes. (May also be used cooled as a gargle, mouth rinse, or for compresses).

*Tincture:* 3-60 drops three times daily

*Capsules:* 800-1000 mg three times daily

**Safety:** Chamomile is one of the herbs that some patients may have an allergic reaction to, especially if you are allergic to ragweed, daisies, or chrysanthemums.

Chamomile should be used with caution in patients on Warfarin or Quinidine.



## Echinacea

Echinacea, commonly known as purple coneflower, is a member of the daisy family.

**Uses:** Echinacea is used externally for wounds, eczema, burns, psoriasis, and other conditions. Internally, it can be used as a preventative at the start of cold and flu symptoms, for chronic respiratory infections, prostatitis, or other diseases.

**How it works:** Echinacea is believed to stimulate the immune system.

### **Dose:**

*Dried root:* 1-2 grams three times daily

*Freeze dried plant:* 325-650 mg three times daily

*Tincture (1:5):* 3-4 ml three times daily

*Fluid extract (1:1):* 1-2 ml three times daily

**Safety:** Patients who are allergic to sunflowers or ragweed should not take Echinacea. Echinacea should not be used for longer than 8 weeks in a row. Patients with auto-immune disorders such as multiple sclerosis, lupus, and leukemia, should not take Echinacea. Patients with immune system problems should also not take Echinacea. Echinacea may cause the tongue to tingle. If you drink freshly pressed juice you may develop a fever.



## *Feverfew*

The name of Feverfew comes from its original use as a fever reducer.

**Uses:** Prevention of migraine headaches. Swelling and fever reducer.

**How it works:** Feverfew is believed to work the same as other products that reduce swelling. It decreases the production of a chemical that causes the swelling and pain. It also stops the release of histamine and serotonin.

**Dose:** The minimum recommended concentration of parthenolide is 0.2%. A single daily dose of 500-2,500 mcg of parthenolide is recommended.

**Safety:** The main side effect is irritation of the tongue and the lining of the mouth. Some people also have indigestion. Patients interested in taking Feverfew should take care to find a good quality product. Many of the available products tested have been found to contain no active ingredients. Patients taking Warfarin should not take Feverfew.



## Garlic

Garlic has been used medicinally for thousands of years. In World War I, the English used garlic in dressings and it was credited with saving the lives of thousands of troops.

**Uses:** Garlic has been shown to reduce blood pressure and cholesterol. It also has been shown to kill germs. Some believe that garlic also aids in cancer prevention.

**How it works:** The compounds that influence enzyme release explain garlic's effect on blood pressure. Exactly how it reduces cholesterol, kills germs, and prevents cancer is not known.

**Dose:** Garlic preparations standardized for alliin are preferred. The recommended daily dose is 8,000-12,000 mcg of alliin. This is equivalent to 1-2 cloves of fresh garlic. The odor-free preparations are not recommended.

**Safety:** The most common side effect is offensive odor. A burning feeling in the stomach or intestines has also reported and is related to the amount used.

Patients taking Warfarin should not use garlic as an herbal therapy. Diabetics should monitor blood glucose during use.



## Ginger

**Uses:** Treatment and prevention of motion sickness, morning sickness, and postoperative nausea. Also has been used for arthritis, muscular pain, and migraine headache.

**How it works:** Ginger contains several active ingredients. One ingredient has been shown to increase movement in the GI tract. Ginger also helps block some mediators of pain and swelling.

**Dose:** Powdered ginger root: 1-4 grams/day. Some studies suggest that fresh ginger root may be better (1-2 grams of powder = 1/4 inch slice).

To prevent motion sickness, 1 gram of ginger should be taken 30 minutes prior to departure and 500mg to 1 gram as symptoms begin to occur.

**Safety:** Large doses of ginger may upset stomach. Doses larger than 6 grams daily are not recommended. Warfarin patients should not use ginger as an herbal therapy.

Patients on calcium channel blockers (Amlodipine, Nifedipine, Felodipine, Diltiazem and Verapamil) should consult a physician before using ginger.



## *Ginkgo Biloba*

The ginkgo tree has existed on earth longer than any other. A Chinese medical book from 2800 BC talks about the use of ginkgo leaves. In 1988, German physicians wrote more prescriptions for ginkgo than any other medication.

**Uses:** Treatment of cerebral vascular insufficiency, peripheral vascular disease, hearing loss, dizziness, asthma, and ringing of the ears. Recent studies have also shown ginkgo to be valuable in treating dementia.

**How it works:** The active ingredients of ginkgo have been shown to protect nerves and may revive damaged nerve cells. They also help the tone and elasticity of blood vessels and increase transmission of brain chemicals.

**Dose:** Look for a Ginkgo Biloba extract standardized to 24% flavanoid glycosides and 6% lactones. Recommended daily amount is 120-160 mg in divided doses. A treatment period of 4-6 weeks is needed to determine effectiveness.

**Safety:** In less than 1% of studied subjects, mild GI disturbances were reported. Slowly increasing the dose may lessen GI effects. Mild headache, lasting 24-48 hours, has also been reported.

Patients on Quinidine and Warfarin should not take ginkgo. Diabetics should take with caution, as ginkgo may elevate blood glucose levels.



## Ginseng

Ginseng is the most widely used of all medicinal herbs. It consists of dried root of several species of ginseng. Although one of the most popular herbs, it is also one of the herbs with very little documented studies to support its use.

**Uses:** Ginseng is most commonly used as a tonic to help get the body back to health.

**How it works:** The active ingredients of ginseng are ginsenosides. Animal studies have shown ginseng lowers blood pressure, lowers cholesterol, and protects against stress ulcers. No studies in humans have duplicated these effects.

**Dose:** The usual dose of ginseng is 1-2 grams daily depending on the ginsenoside content. Other sources recommend 2-4 ml of fluid extract (1:1) taken 1 to 3 times daily.

**Safety:** Ginseng is the example most often used to encourage the regulation of herbal therapies. Experiments in the late 1970's showed that 60% of the products tested contained so little ginseng as to be worthless, and 25% contained no ginseng at all.

Side effects of ginseng include insomnia, irritability, anxiety, skin eruptions, diarrhea, headaches, low blood sugar, and increased blood pressure.

People with high blood pressure or diabetes should not take ginseng. Warfarin patients should not take ginseng. Patients on monoamine oxidase inhibitors should not take ginseng.



## Goldenseal

Goldenseal, also known as yellow root, is a member of the buttercup family.

**Uses:** Goldenseal has been used as a tonic for the mucous membranes, primarily those of the digestive system. It gained popularity when heroin addicts believed that taking large amounts of Goldenseal could prevent detection of opiates in the bloodstream. This has since been proven to be untrue. Goldenseal is now believed not to be medically useful.

**How it works:** Alkaloids found in Goldenseal are responsible for whatever actions it has, causing slight vasoconstriction and sedation.

**Dose:** Tincture 20-90 drops three times daily. Capsules should be standardized to 5% hydrastine; dose is 250-500 mg three times daily.

**Safety:** Goldenseal may cause low blood sugars in diabetics. Nausea and vomiting have also been reported with Goldenseal use.

Goldenseal should not be used by patients with high blood pressure or history of seizures.





## Hawthorn

Compared to their herbal remedies, Hawthorn is relatively new.

**Uses:** Hawthorn has been used for high blood pressure, disturbances in heart rhythm, hardening of the arteries, and chest pain.

**How it works:** Hawthorn helps to increase blood supply to the heart tissue. It also helps increase the strength of the heart beat. It blocks an enzyme which lowers blood pressure, in a way similar to drugs such as Lisinopril, Fosinopril, Captopril, and Quinapril.

**Dose:** Look for capsules or tablets standardized to 1.8%; dose is 100-250 mg. Also may be taken as 1-2 ml of fluid extract (1:1) three times daily

**Safety:** Hawthorn's activity is not immediate and develops slowly over time. High doses of Hawthorn may cause low blood pressure and sedation. Very few adverse effects have been reported with low doses, but Hawthorn should not be stopped abruptly.

Because Hawthorn is used to treat heart conditions it should only be used under the supervision of a physician or other health care provider. If Hawthorn is used in conjunction with Digoxin or ACE inhibitors, the dose of these agents may need to be decreased.



## *Kava*

Kava is a drink of the South Pacific that was first introduced to the modern world by Captain James Cook. Since then, Kava has been served to officials visiting the South Pacific, including Presidents and Pope John Paul II. Most commonly, Kava is served as a tea made of the dried roots.

**Uses:** Treatment for nervousness, restlessness, and stress.

**How it works:** It is believed it works in a similar way to the drugs Valium or Xanax.

**Dose:** An extract of 55-70% kavalactones is the current standard. The daily dose of kava should be 140-210 mg in 2-3 doses. It has also been noticed that fresh Kava, not usually available in America, is the most effective.

**Safety:** When used on a regular basis, Kava can cause a dry scaly rash on the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet. It may also cause the skin, hair or nails to turn yellow. Some patients may be allergic to Kava.

Kava can cause a feeling of giddiness. Patients taking Kava should not drive or operate heavy machinery. Patients should not drink alcohol or take other drugs for treating stress when using Kava.



## *Milk Thistle*

Milk Thistle is a tall herb with prickly leaves and a milky sap. Use of this herb can be traced back to the Romans of the first century. The fruit of this plant has been found to work best.

**Uses:** Protects and detoxifies the liver. It has been used successfully to lower the number of deaths from cirrhosis. It has also been used for viral hepatitis and mushroom poisonings.

**How it works:** An active ingredient in milk thistle works on the factors that are responsible for liver damage. It protects those liver cells not irreversibly damaged and helps the regeneration process.

**Dose:** The correct dose of milk thistle is based on its silymarin content. The usual dosage range is 200-400 mg daily in divided doses.

**Safety:** European studies show that milk thistle has very low toxicity. Possible side effects may be loose stools and allergic reaction.



## *St. John's Wort*

St. John's Wort is an herbal remedy receiving much attention in the press. It is named for St. John the Baptist.

**Uses:** As an antidepressant for the treatment of mild to moderate depression and the treatment of nervous disorders.

**How it works:** It is thought to increase the amount of certain brain chemicals, such as serotonin.

**Dose:** Look for a standardized hypericin content of 0.3%. The dose is 300 mg three times daily.

**Safety:** St. John's Wort is only effective in the treatment of mild to moderate depression. It should not be used for more severe conditions. It should not be used if you are taking other drugs to treat mood disorders.

The most common side effect of St. John's Wort is stomach upset. This may be helped by taking with food. Sensitivity to sunlight may also be a side effect. Use a sunscreen to avoid this problem.

Do not take St. John's Wort if you are also taking:

- Bromocriptine
- Pergolide
- Pramipexol



## *Saw Palmetto*

Saw Palmetto is a small scrubby palm tree.

**Uses:** To treat an enlarged prostate and prostatitis.

**How it works:** Saw Palmetto blocks the changing of testosterone to DHT. DHT is the chemical that stimulates enlargement of the prostate. Saw Palmetto also relaxes the smooth muscles at the opening of the bladder, making it easier to urinate.

**Dose:** The extract should be standardized to 85-95% fatty acids and sterols. The dose of this extract is 160mg twice daily.

**Safety:** The number of side effects for Saw Palmetto is small.

The most common effect is headache.

Before using Saw Palmetto, patients should have a test to be sure they do not have prostate cancer.



## Valerian

Valerian is one of the most popular and widely used herbs. It is known as the “Valium of the 1800’s,” even though it has no chemical similarity to that drug.

**Uses:** Sedative, muscle relaxant, antispasmodic

**How it works:** The active ingredients of valerian have not been identified and exactly how it works is not known.

**Dose:**

*Tincture* (1:5): 4-6 ml

*Fluid Extract* (1:1): 2-3 ml

*Capsules* (1-1.5% valtrate or 0.8% valeric acid): 400-900 mg.

Valerian root is also commonly used as a tea.

**Safety:** Side effects include morning drowsiness, headache, excitability, and uneasiness. It has been shown to help people fall asleep, but not to stop them from waking during the night. Don’t use Valerian if you are taking prescription sedatives.

<i>Quick Reference</i>	
<b>If you have any of the following conditions:</b>	<b>Be cautious about using these herbs:</b>
<b>Diabetes</b>	Garlic Ginger Ginseng Hawthorn Ma huang Nettle
<b>Hypertension (High Blood Pressure)</b>	Devil's Claw Ginseng Goldenseal Hawthorn Licorice Ma Huang Squill Yohimbe
<b>Depression</b>	Kava-kava Valerian
<b>Allergies to ragweed, pollens, etc.</b>	Chamomile Echinecea Feverfew Yarrow Goldenrod St. John's Wort Slippery Elm

*Adapted from the Pharmacist's Letter (volume 98, number 1)*

## *Quick Reference*

<b>If you are taking any of these medications:</b>	<b>Check with your doctor before using these herbs:</b>
<p style="text-align: center;">Anticoagulants (warfarin)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Antiplatelet drugs (aspirin, NSAIDs, ticlopidine, clopidogrel)</p>	<p>Alfalfa Camomile Cinchona Bark Clove Oil Ginkgo Garlic Ginger Ginseng Feverfew</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">CNS Stimulants (decongestants, Ritalin, caffeine, theophylline, appetite suppressants)</p>	<p>Guarana Kola Ma huang St. John's Wort Yohimbe</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">CNS Depressants (alcohol, opioids, benzodiazepines, antihistamines)</p>	<p>Hawthorn Kava-kava Skullcap Valerian</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Antidepressants (tricyclics, SSRIs, MAO inhibitors)</p>	<p>Ginseng Ma huang Passion flower St. John's Wort Yohimbe</p>

*Adapted from the Pharmacist's Letter (volume 98, number 1)*



## *Herbs that are Unsafe*

Arnica  
Bryony  
Calamus  
Chaparrel  
Coltsfoot  
Comfrey  
Ephedra (ma-huang)  
False Hellebore  
Foxglove  
Germander  
Henbane  
Indian snakeroot  
Ipecac  
Licorice  
Life Root  
Lilly of the Valley  
Male fern  
Mandrake  
Pasque Flower  
Pennyroyal  
Pheasant's eye  
Squill  
Thorn Apple  
Yellow Jasmine  
Yohimbe







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